

NOTE: The President's news conference began at 12 noon at the Bush Ranch. In his remarks, he referred to Anne-Mette Rasmussen, wife of Prime Minister Rasmussen; President Mahmud Ahmadinejad of Iran; and Gen. David H. Petraeus, USA, commanding general, Multi-National Force—Iraq.

Remarks to the National Association of Attorneys General

March 3, 2008

General Wasden, thank you, sir. And General Lynch, thank you for having the Attorney General and me here to visit with the Nation's attorney generals. I thank you very much for serving the country. I'm honored that you've stepped forward to say, you know, my family—I'm going to put my family in such a way that we're going to serve together. And I hope you have found the experience to be as enriching as I've found it—my experience in public life to be.

I also know that you're dealing with a wide variety of issues. I was the Governor of Texas. I see my—the attorney general of Texas here. It's been—it was a great joy to work with Greg when I was the Governor. We have a solemn responsibility together, and that's to protect the country. You do it in a variety of ways. And we've got a responsibility here. As a matter of fact, there's no greater responsibility at the Federal Government than to protect the American people, which means that we must make sure our professionals have the tools they need to do the jobs we've asked them to do.

Now, there's a serious debate here, and some of the attorney generals have written a letter, both Democrats and Republicans, urging that the debate be solved in such a way that the professionals can do the job. And I thank you for wading in. There's a lot of legal complexities on the FISA renewal debate, but the real issue comes down to this: To defend the country, we need to be able to monitor communications of terrorists quickly and be able to do it effectively.

And we can't do it without the cooperation of private companies. Now, unfortunately, some of the private companies have been sued for billions of dollars because they are believed to have helped defend America

after the attacks on 9/11. Now the question is, should these lawsuits be allowed to proceed, or should any company that may have helped save American lives be thanked for performing a patriotic service? Should those who stepped forward to say we're going to help defend America have to go to the courthouse to defend themselves, or should the Congress and the President say, thank you for doing your patriotic duty? I believe we ought to say thank you.

I'm really appreciative of the fact that 21 State attorney generals, 7 Democrats and 14 Republicans, wrote a letter stating that assistance from private companies, as they put it, "is utterly essential" and urges the Senate—at the time—to approve FISA reform that protects the companies from lawsuits. I think that represents what most people—how most people think here in the country.

The Senate heard you and heard the voices of other people and passed a really good FISA reform bill by a strong bipartisan majority, 68 to 29. The answer to the question about whether we ought to thank or sue is also clear to the majority in the House of Representatives. If this bill, the Senate bill, were allowed—were given a vote on the floor of the House of Representatives, it would pass. There's enough votes available to pass a good Senate bill that would give our professionals the tools they need to protect the American people from further attack.

Unfortunately, a minority in the House has been holding the bill up. Now, this weekend there was some encouraging news. The chairman of the House Intelligence Committee, Sylvester Reyes, said that he was open to passing a bill with protections for our private sector partners, including those companies who are currently being sued for allegedly helping us after 9/11. I appreciate the chairman's comments, and I urge the full House to pass this legislation as soon as possible.

I feel strongly about this issue, not only because I know we need to have the private carriers available to provide information, but, to put it bluntly, if the enemy is calling in to somebody in the United States, we need to know who they're talking to and why they're calling and what they intend to do.

These lawsuits are really unfair if you think about it. If any of the companies believed

to have helped us—I'm just going to tell you: They were told it was legal by the Government, and they were told it was necessary by the Government. And here they are getting sued. It would be dangerous—the reason—the danger in all this is that because the private companies are fearful of lawsuits or being besieged by lawsuits, they would be less willing to help in the future.

If your Government has said this is legal and we want your help and then all of a sudden they get sued for billions of dollars, you can imagine how hesitant they'll be with future requests. And yet the threat is ongoing. And that's why we said, failure by the House to act on the Senate bill would create an intelligence gap that is unacceptable.

So I appreciate your interest in the subject. Thank you for giving me and the General a chance to come by, and God bless you. Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 1:22 p.m. in Room 350 of the Dwight D. Eisenhower Executive Office Building. In his remarks, he referred to State Attorneys General Lawrence Wasden of Idaho, Patrick C. Lynch of Rhode Island, and Greg Abbott of Texas.

Remarks Following a Meeting With Lieutenant General Raymond T. Odierno

March 3, 2008

General Ray Odierno served for 30 months in Iraq. He's nominated to Vice Chairman [Vice Chief of Staff] * of the Army. And I asked him to come in for several reasons. One, I wanted to thank him. And in thanking the general, I'm really thanking everybody who has worn the uniform and served in this war against the extremists and terrorists. And in thanking the general, I'm also thanking Mrs. Odierno and every wife or every husband whose spouse has been far away from home and is serving.

And in listening to the general, I was listening carefully to make sure that the decisions that had been made were the right decisions and that the progress that's being made is real. I mean, this is a man who was there

when times looked grim and a man who observed firsthand progress that was made as a result of the surge.

He was a straightforward fellow who gave me his candid advice on how best to proceed—not necessarily with troop levels, because that study is going on now, but in making sure that we continue programs such as what's called the CERP money. This is money for our commanders to make—to help these local folks rebuild and reconcile.

And so, general, I want to thank you for your service. And I appreciate the fact that you really snatched defeat out of the jaws of those who are trying to defeat us in Iraq. You were the—you and General Petraeus were a unbelievably strong one-two combination.

And my call and my assurance, sir, is that the gains that you and your teams have made will continue on, because stakes in Iraq are essential for peace, essential for freedom, and essential for the security of this country. I'm honored to be your Commander in Chief.

NOTE: The President spoke at 2:10 p.m. in the Oval Office at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Linda Odierno, wife of Lt. Gen. Odierno; and Gen. David H. Petraeus, USA, commanding general, Multi-National Force—Iraq.

Remarks on Presenting Posthumously the Congressional Medal of Honor to Woodrow W. Keeble

March 3, 2008

The President. Welcome. Thanks for coming. Mr. Vice President, Mr. Secretary, members of the Dakotan congressional delegations, Senator from Alaska, other Members of Congress, members of my Cabinet, members of the administration, members of the United States Armed Forces, distinguished guests: Welcome to the White House.

The Medal of Honor is the highest award for valor a President can bestow. And I'm honored recipients of the Medal of Honor have joined us. Thank you for coming.

* White House correction.